



Photo by SSgt Russell Wicke



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Situational AWARENESS IS KEY

By Capt Mark Gruber, Ramstein AB, Germany

Situational awareness, also known as SA, has become a common term among many specialties. There are many ways to explain this somewhat nebulous term, but in a nutshell it is “keeping in the game,” knowing what is going on around you. SA is the ability to picture oneself in relation to what might happen, what has happened and what is happening no matter how it is defined. Yogi Berra may have said it best, “You can observe a lot by just watching.” Having SA requires you to have an accurate perception of what is going on, deciding what threats

times have you seen important paperwork that has errors? It is likely a result of getting distracted, task saturated, and/or being complacent. These are all contributors to losing one’s SA. If we can increase individual and team SA, we will improve our effectiveness and may reduce the number of accidents and incidents caused by the “human factor.”

SA is at the core of our ability to make accurate decisions and then perform the appropriate action. Anything that takes your attention away from the task at hand will reduce your level of understanding of what

How do you know if you have SA or have lost it? There are some signs that may highlight a lapse in your SA. For aircrew: Have you ever forgotten your helmet or G-suit before going out to the aircraft? Moot point if you’re a KC-135 pilot (I hope). Have you missed important information during a brief or ATC clearance? For ground-based personnel: Have you ever locked your keys in your car because you allowed something to distract you? Have you been jolted back to reality by your supervisor as you thought about your plans for the weekend? These are some ex-

Now, how can you “stay in the game” and maintain SA? Good question. Prevention is always the best cure to a problem. Honestly assessing your physical and mental condition is an important step. Did you get enough sleep? Are you eating a well balanced diet? Are things taken care of at home? Experience and careful preparation are also key factors. When was the last time you accomplished this particular task? Did you really complete the required training or “pencil whip” it?

You are responsible for your proficiency and knowledge

sources, also known as CRM. Yes, you heard it right, Crew Resource Management. It’s not just for heavies (or even aircrew) anymore. Effective CRM is extremely important to ensure you and your team maintain SA.

You’ve done everything humanly possible to maintain SA, but ... you lose it because you’re human. What now? Once you recognize loss of SA in yourself (or more likely someone else notices it in you), get back to the basics by reprioritizing tasks. You’ve probably heard “aviate, navigate, and communicate” from

the aviation world. Same rules apply to every setting — focus on the right priorities. Don’t let yourself stay distracted or divert your attention to something that is less important.

Finally, if you feel you are losing it, fess up and use the resources you have available (other members in your flight, team, etc., instruments or other tools of the trade) to put your head back in the game. As the wise sage Yogi Berra said, “90 percent of the game is half mental,” and we need all the help we can get. Now, let’s be safe out there. ▶

SA

“Clues” to lost

This list isn’t perfect or all-inclusive, but it provides some common indicators that someone is about to lose (or has already lost) situational awareness.

Being “Behind The Power Curve”

Breakdown in communications

Fixation

Missed steps on checklist

Making simple errors

Complacency

Confusion

Once you recognize loss of SA, do everything in your power to get it back!



Photo by SSgt Russell Wicke



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Photo by TSgt Richard Freeland

are looming, and then forecast your actions to appropriately defend against the threat.

Why is maintaining SA important? Because loss of it is the leading cause of accidents associated with human error, and it’s NOT just an “aircrew problem.” No matter what job you have — aircrew, security forces, maintainers, medical personnel, or services — you need to maintain SA. Don’t believe that SA even applies to office workers? How many

is going on around you. Attention management anomalies, such as channelized attention, complacency, distraction, task saturation, inattention, habituation, and temporal distortion, all negatively impact situational awareness. Obviously, this can be hazardous to your mission effectiveness, (even your health) whether you’re in the cockpit, in your car, looking at a radarscope, or entering data into a computer.

amples of common indicators for lost SA. Missing communications, violating standard operating procedures, missing your intended “target,” confusion, fixation, not following checklists, and using procedures that were not planned or briefed are all signs that you may have lost the “big picture.” And finally, if you get the classic gut feeling or the hairs on your neck stand on end — you’ve probably lost SA.

level. Take it seriously. It is also useful to enhance your working memory by rehearsing possible events. Anticipate problem areas and your reaction to them to reduce any surprises. When changing shifts or transferring a task to someone, ensure he or she has the “big picture” by briefing him or her thoroughly before they take over. Have a task management plan in place — know what you’ll do when the workload gets hectic. And finally, use all available re-